Wildwood Farm

'Wildwood' is being tamed

Wildwood Farm is gradually being tamed.

Brothers John and Phil Harrison are transforming their steep, rolling land into an ideal site for the growing of an unusual crop–trees.

Wildwood is one of the larger farms in Appomattox County. A majority of the land on the 908-acre operation is too steep for farm machinery and will not support grass for pasture.

"It's a standing joke between us that about the only thing some of our land is good for is to help hold the world together," laughed 33-year-old Phil. "Trees were really our only option."

The Harrison brothers didn't actually begin exercising that option until 1978 when John returned to the area and entered into a partnership with brother Phil on the family farm. At that time, an active timber harvesting and reforestation program was started.

Wildwood Farm has its roots in the 1880-1910 period when a great uncle assembled several parcels of land into the present farm. In 1944, the property was purchased by the boys' parents, John and Elizabeth Harrison.

The elder Harrison worked for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and, with hired help, operated the farm as a small-scale beef and timber operation. Following his death, Mrs. Harrison continued operation of the farm with part-time help from son Phil and hired help from Horace and Melvin Phelps. The Phelps, who still work on the farm, have been employed continously at Wildwood for 41 and 30 years, respectively.

Like 90 percent of the county's farmers, both John and Phil have off-farm jobs. "Daddy drilled into our heads that farming probably wasn't a very good way to make a lot of money," John, age 37, recalled. "So I went to Virginia Tech with ambitions of becoming an engineer. I later transferred to forestry and graduated in 1967."

Today John is a pulpwood buyer for Continental Forest Industries, Dillwyn, and Phil works as a maintenance mechanic for Armstrong Furniture, Appomattox. Phil's mechanical expertise is put to good use on the farm's four tractors and assorted implements.

JOHN [LEFT] AND PHIL HARRISON, operators of Wildwood Farm. Because of its excellent forest management program, the farm was selected as a member of the American Tree Farm System by the American Forest Institute.

Since forming their partnership, the Harrisons have reforested 218 acres with loblolly pine, bringing the total timber acreage on the farm to 608.

Although Wildwood Farm is out of the natural range of loblolly pine, the trees do well on the rolling land. Explaining their decision to grow pine timber, John said, "This loamy, clay soil grows better pine than hardwood timber such as oak or walnut. We can also turn a profit with pine in about 20 years."

The Harrisons generally clear-cut and burn off 15-30 acre blocks of land for planting in July or August. They average planting 800 tree seedlings to the acre. "This size timber harvest generates enough income to help us out on the farm, yet it's not so massive that we can't get it burnt off and replanted quickly," John explained.

Unlike most farm crops, once the seedlings are planted they require little attention. The critical period occurs when the seedlings are small and stand a chance of being shaded out. "Hardwoods will come back out after being burned off and the stump sprouts will also shade out the seedlings if not controlled," Phil noted. "Hand-sprayers are used to spray a herbicide on the unwanted timber to 'release' the pines."

Although aerial spraying is available, the Harrisons continue the use of hand sprayers so they can concentrate the herbicide exactly where they want it. "Research has shown that pines in 'released' areas will average one inch more in diameter than those in non-released areas," John said. "This means quite a bit more fiber when it comes time to market the timber."

Because both brothers have full-time jobs, they contract out the planting, spraying and logging of the pines. John's expertise in forestry comes in handy when a tract of land is burned off for planting, an art in itself.

An eight- to 12-foot fire line is first plowed around the land as a safety measure. A kerosene fire is then started against the wind, a method known as 'backfiring.' "Getting a good backfire is what takes so long," John explained. "Once it's going, you can set another fire into the wind and the two fires will meet."

"In a few years, the sites we burn off will be excellent places to quail hunt or find turkeys and deer," he added.

PHIL HARRISON [left] shows Appomattox County Extension agent, Jim Smith, a burned-off tract of land that has been replanted in loblolly pines.

"The undergrowth will be good feed and cover for the wildlife. It's not a desert as some people have called it."

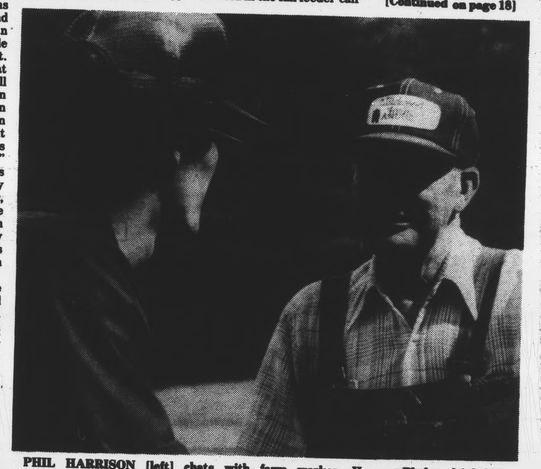
A majority of the Harrison's pine is sold as pulpwood for paper products with some of the wood marketed as saw timber. The Harrison farming team estimates that timber sales account for at least 50 percent of the farm profit.

With only 300 acres of open land, the enterprising brothers maximize the use of good land with a herd of 60 grade Angus cattle and a few Angus-Hereford cross-bred cows. The herd is enrolled in the Beef Cattle Improvement Association and a majority of the calves are sold in the fall feeder calf sales.

The farm program is rounded out with 12 acres of corn, 75 acres of hay and 12 acres of wheat.

Because of their excellent management techniques and reforestation program, the Harrison farm was chosen to be featured on "the 1982 Virginia Farm Management

[Continued on page 18]



PHIL HARRISON [left] chats with farm worker, Horace Phelps [right] a 41-year-employee of Wildwood Farm.

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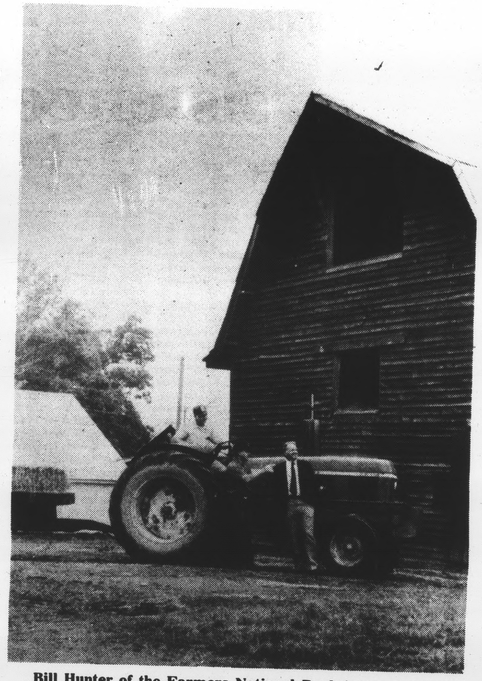

Bill Hunter of the Farmers National Bank is seen visiting with the Hix Brothers, John and William.

James D. Bennett, owner-operator, Bull Hill Station; member, State Board of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

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